



What Comes Next?

An Argument for Irregular War in National Defense

Major Phil W. Reynolds, U.S. Army

ARE WE WINNING the war on terrorism? Former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld asked, “Is DOD changing fast enough to deal with the new 21st-century security environment?”¹ Most would agree that the war on terrorism, the so-called “Long War,” is generational in nature, and less a match-up of numbers than one of resources. Today, in these times of fiscal constraint, the question no longer is “Are we winning the war on terrorism?” but “What comes next?”

The answer: Murky, irregular conflicts will increase while state-versus-state wars decrease. Since World War II, there have been 44 interstate wars and 372 asymmetric conflicts.² Iraq, Afghanistan, and 9/11 are prima facie evidence that “strong actors [like the United States and NATO] have encountered a class of weak actors . . . who are increasingly apt to use indirect strategy to prevent others from coercing them.”³ Already the Department of Defense has moved toward a framework that integrates this type of irregular war. The 2009 *Capstone Concept for Special Operations* noted, “The foreseeable future promises to be an era of persistent conflict—a period of protracted confrontation among states, non-state entities, and individual actors increasingly willing to use violence to achieve their political ends. This future is unlikely to unfold as steady-state peace punctuated by distinct surges of intense conflict.”⁴

Asymmetric conflicts against irrational actors engaging in activities ranging from catastrophic terrorism to intrastate, ethnic, and civil wars are the most likely threat to U.S. security and interests. Conventional forces cannot deter terrorists and insurgents without costly deployments. The new U.S. strategy must be politically palatable and cost-effective, and it must prevent our enemies from attacking and destabilizing our allies and hurting Americans at home. The most dangerous threats to the United States are the ones for which we cannot prepare conventional responses, so it is essential that the United States develop and use irregular warfare (IW) as a deterrent that creates strategic depth. It must engage threats to homeland security before they achieve critical mass and move beyond their own borders. Offensive IW conducted by U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), along with carefully coordinated “Phase 0” activities, can achieve this goal.

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PHOTO: Competitors conduct a static line jump from a C-130 aircraft during Fuerzas Comando 2012 at the Colombian National Training Center on Fort Tolimaida, Colombia, 13 June 2012.

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The Cost of Peace

Unfortunately, our irregular warfare adversaries (IWAs) range from criminal networks to revolutionary insurgents to sophisticated terrorist networks focused on mass destruction inside the United States. According to the capstone concept, advances in weapons “will render such irregular threats ever more lethal, capable of producing widespread chaos, and otherwise difficult to counter.”⁵ The very dominance of U.S. conventional power pushes weaker opponents into asymmetric conflicts, breaking the relationship between economic and military power that had produced superiority on the battlefield. This underlying causality, the increasing lethality of weapons, and the longer duration of wars mean that a strategy of using conventional forces aiming for victory in quick, kinetic operations is no longer feasible.⁶

Yet, it is inconceivable that the United States would surrender its position of influence and responsibility in the world by choosing not to engage in asymmetric, irregular wars. The United States will increasingly conduct counterterrorism counterinsurgency (COIN), unconventional warfare, foreign internal defense, and stability operations, the five operations of irregular warfare as defined by DOD’s 2010 Joint Operating Concept for Irregular War.⁷ Since 9/11, USSOCOM manpower has nearly doubled, its budget nearly tripled, and overseas deployments have quadrupled. USSOCOM has the responsibility for synchronizing and conducting global operations against terrorist networks and synchronizing global training and assistance planning. This means USSOCOM “reviews, coordinates, and prioritizes all DOD plans that support the global campaign against terror, and then makes recommendations to the Joint Staff regarding force and resource allocations to meet global requirements.”⁸

Resources drive strategy. Emerging from a difficult decade and perhaps the hardest fight in its history, the Department of Defense will have

to create a new strategy with fewer resources. The U.S. military will have to walk a fine line, paying for a conventional force robust enough to deter unfriendly state actions, and yet maintaining a force that can deploy and resolve a myriad of problems posed by nonstate actors engaging in irregular warfare.

The COIN strategies used in Iraq and Afghanistan will not be replicated because the costs of deploying conventional forces will only increase. The final direct cost of U.S. involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan may reach two trillion dollars, and the money and political support simply is not there to repeat this resource-rich strategy. Moreover, as John Arquilla notes, “The evidence of the last ten years shows that massive applications of force have done little. Networked organizations like Al-Qaeda have proven how easily it is to dodge heavy punches and persist to land sharp counterblows.”⁹

If, in the coming years, government deficits force unwanted cuts in the defense budget, then DOD would do well to preserve USSOCOM funds at the expense of the services. Special operations forces have shown they can do more with less, demonstrating efficiency the services cannot match. Unsustainable costs further erode the efficacy of the military’s conventional forces as a deterrent to our IW adversaries. The Defense Department has announced that it will cut \$487 billion over the next 10 years.¹⁰ However, the budget’s annual growth of 4 percent from FY 2000 to FY 2010 has been greater than historical gross domestic product growth.¹¹ This created a bubble in defense funding not entirely due to the costs of Iraq and Afghanistan. Secretary Panetta recently addressed the exploding personnel costs that have grown by nearly 90 percent since 2001.¹² Personnel costs now consume 45 percent of the defense budget, totaling \$250 billion in FY 2012. The Defense Health Program in particular grew at a real annual rate of 6.3 percent from FY 2001 to FY 2011, but the budget only requests a 1.2 percent increase, a

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case in which growth is greater than inflation, but which the budget request doesn't cover.¹³ For FY13, the Defense Health Program drops from \$52 to \$48 billion, with those savings coming from higher fees, co-pays and deductibles for retirees.¹⁴

Policy makers could be forced to choose between expensive acquisition and Research and Development (R&D) for major wars and personnel and IW capabilities. Since FY 2001, overall active-duty end strength has remained relatively flat, hovering around 1.5 million, but the budget now supports a force with essentially the same size and force structure as in FY 2001 at a 35 percent higher cost.¹⁵ The true danger is that the dollar squeeze between expensive conventional forces deterrence and deficits will ultimately limit options for the president in dealing with *both* threats, conventional and irregular. Recently, Secretary Panetta has indicated that "as it draws down forces in Iraq and Afghanistan and cuts security spending by hundreds of billions of dollars over the next decade, the Department... is planning to reduce capability for conventional military operations and counterinsurgency, shrink the size of the military,

maintain counterterrorism capability and invest more in countering high-end threats like long-range weapons being developed by China that could challenge U.S. power projection capabilities in the Western Pacific."¹⁶ Reinvestment will go towards a new long-range bomber and carrier-based unmanned strike and surveillance aircraft. The FY13 R&D and procurement request is 32 percent of the whole, reflecting a growing reliance on technology as a way of reducing risk, and costs of personnel and is likely to grow.

As the out years stretch on, money will become tight. In the Army, the choice between traditional war and IW will become acute. The Army believes modular brigades and wide area security allow it to wage both kinds of war, but the success of that idea is dubious at best.¹⁷ The comparative advantage the United States has enjoyed in technology will be difficult to maintain, as the land forces "reset" equipment, a program funded by overseas contingency funds. With political backing for operations in Afghanistan waning, congressional appetite for this discretionary funding may disappear, meaning those "reset" costs will have to



(U.S. Army, SGT Ben Watson)

A U.S. Army intelligence sergeant with Special Operations Task Force-South climbs over an abandoned compound during a security patrol in Panjwaii District, Kandahar Province, Afghanistan, 20 February 2011.

be absorbed by the services' base budget. Inevitably, dollars meant for IW requirements will shift to support the services' operations and maintenance requirements. Fewer dollars will be forced to do more. This is the hollowing out of the force.

The DOD has already taken steps to increase the size of special operations forces, a relatively inexpensive option for IW.¹⁸ In the FY 13 budget, the president has asked for \$10.4 billion for USSOCOM, down from 10.5 in FY 12, with about \$2.6 billion funded with overseas contingency funds.¹⁹ Still, in contrast with the services' \$315 billion in Operations & Maintenance and procurement costs, IW capabilities seem cheap by comparison.

IWA Characteristics

The characteristics of our irregular warfare adversaries demand a response option more nimble and deployable than conventional forces. Confronting what Andrew Mack calls the "resolve" and "strategic commitment" of IWA requires using our own domestic irregular warfare capability, resident in USSOCOM.²⁰ The Long War against these loosely organized small groups, bound by difficult-to-define ideas, needs a long-term, low-cost strategy, as outlined above. The second requirement is a low-visibility, almost shadow employment of forces that takes place below the radar of the media and the U.S. population. The deployed footprint of conventional forces and their relative immobility vis-à-vis IWA is a poor choice at best. U.S. armed forces massed in World War II-style formations capable of delivering heavy firepower have had great trouble finding and fighting the enemy's small, dispersed, but coordinated bands, which have only grown stronger in the years since 9/11. This is a global struggle between tradition-bound nations and innovation-oriented networks.²¹

These decentralized organizations are more efficient in resource distribution and consumption, and highly effective at leveraging their information advantage. The chief failure of conventional forces as a deterrent or preemptive option is that our irregular warfare adversaries attack *where* a stronger opponent lacks power and resources; this is Mao's "strategic defensive" in the information age.

On the U.S. side, the "myth of the offensive" and U.S. success in World War II and the first Gulf War

have bred the belief that since the nation goes to war with limitless resource superiority, nothing less than *unconditional* defeat of the enemy is acceptable. The country has created a vast military-industrial complex to support this notion. Embodied most recently as the Powell doctrine, it is, however, a false notion, since most conflicts in our history have not ended with the enemy's unconditional defeat. This belief in American exceptionalism, particularly in armed conflict, provides a challenging obstacle to success in IW. Few of our adversaries can be identified clearly, much less defeated. In this murky perimeter, the United States must conduct deterrence and preemption against irrational and fanatic enemies in ungoverned areas of failed and failing states and be satisfied with enemy inaction as a viable objective.

Our irregular adversaries use their information advantage to combine political and criminal elements to influence the population. They use the low-level and persistent engagements of irregular warfare to gain an information advantage against their enemies. The Joint Operating Concept emphasizes this *political* element: "These threats are enmeshed in the population and increasingly . . . these conflicts are contests for influence and legitimacy over relevant populations."²² The political element is dominant, and the population is the target during the initial phases of any IW activity. Then the act of deterrence becomes one of influencing the population to make the decision that is more favorable to U.S. goals. A population chooses between the competing alternatives provided by the IWA and the United States or host nation based on benefits and costs.²³ In areas of weak state control where the population is vulnerable to IWA activity, those preferences will be concealed, seamlessly blended within the rich contextual fabric of IW. Conventional military planners and units seek to dominate the environment and suffer from cognitive dissonance when confronted with adversaries who must be understood in context, as part of a networked whole. Attempts to restore resonance by simplifying the problem are filled with checklists, link programs, reams of data and slides, and burgeoning headquarters' staffs. In such a complicated environment, author Keith Payne writes that "in no case could the desired information be outlined" and attempts to do so were "frustrated by ambiguous and conflicting data."²⁴ The larger the force structure deployed to execute the activities to



(US Air Force, TSGT DeNoris Mickle)

U.S. Army soldiers from Alpha Company, 4th Battalion, 10th Special Forces Group, Fort Carson, CO, observe a CV-22 Osprey during Emerald Warrior 2011, Cannon AFB, NM, 1 March 2011.

defeat the IWA, the worse the cognitive dissonance becomes.

USSOCOM's small teams seek to be unobtrusive, becoming part of the cultural fabric, and over time develop a contextual understanding of the environment required in these *social* wars of the future. These small teams conceal their own resources and power projection capabilities, thus getting inside their adversaries' information advantage.

This a strategy the Army can sustain with less resources, relying on a perception of power and on client states to deter aggression, rather than on expensive, less mobile conventional forces stationed at the edges of the world. The relative immobility of conventional forces increases the information advantage that our adversaries enjoy. Their advantage relies on support of the population, among which they move with impunity, like Mao's famous "fish in the sea." Offensive irregular warfare conducted by the United States must involve an approach of counterinsurgency and stability operations and developing host nation capabilities, while conducting foreign international defense or security force assistance. This layered approach would generate

contextually integrated intelligence that blunts the IWA information advantage.

Finally, national-level counterterrorism forces engage the IWA when deterrence fails. This highly selective type of preemption will still be necessary because these new enemies of the 21st century seem intent on engaging in unlimited warfare. They routinely target soft civilian targets in order to send messages to the relevant populations. Abu Hajir Al Muqrin, a theorist of modern insurgent and revolutionary terrorism, wrote in his *Guerilla War* that civilians can be legitimate targets.²⁵ Against *these* enemies preemption will necessarily take precedence over deterrence.

A Way Ahead

Irregular warfare as a method to achieve national strategic goals will be exceedingly complex to execute. It will require patience and close cooperation among all federal agencies and a specialized, highly trained, low visibility force. A new effort to protect the 1206 "global train and equip" funds should be made. Budget requests for these funds have fallen consistently in recent

years as greater efforts are made to find savings in the DOD budget. Congressional approval of this funding could give DOD the ability to respond quickly to emerging threats, and allow time for the slower, more politicized Foreign Military Financing to be put in place. To move beyond congressional concerns that such funds overlap with traditional Department of State activities, the Army could take the funds from the geographic COCOMs and give them to USSOCOM.

We need better cooperation between the geographic combatant commanders and USSOCOM to coordinate both commands' "Phase 0" activities. Typically, the geographic COCOMs and USSOCOM have different immediate and mid-range goals with partner countries, even if the long-term goal is the same. Giving USSOCOM its own theater security cooperation program would also be an important tool in tying together State and Defense during "Phase 0."

Closer coordination between federal agencies can save costs and generate better IW capabilities. As difficult to imagine as it was a decade ago, interdepartmental cooperation is gaining ground. In its 2012 budget request, the Department of State allocated \$56 million for its Global Security Contingency Fund.²⁶ This is a coordinating body that will integrate Department of State activities with DOD and has set aside an additional \$25 million for conflict stabilization operations.²⁷ This fund provided training and for deploying experts in the fields of policing and rule of law, transitional governance, and economic stabilization and development. The Global Security Contingency Fund and conflict stabilization operations give the United States the opportunity to create "mini-task forces" to deploy and work together *before* an emergency occurs. This deepens the well of IW experience and generates tremendous efficiencies; the next crisis averted could save a trillion dollars and thousands of lives.²⁸

Finally, the services and USSOCOM should go beyond the requirements to synchronize emerging conventional forces capabilities with special operation forces-enabling requirements. The SOCOM commander could train and equip attached FORSCOM units to provide flex capability for particularly important joint and combined training exchanges. By training and deploying together, the

enablers located in the conventional force fulfill the intent of the law and increase the number of personnel familiar with SOCOM operations. Utilizing conventional force line companies and battalions as trainers enables a sustained presence, beyond the capability of individual operational detachment-Alpha. In executing this type of security force assistance with no change to their METL, conventional forces battalions gain crucial IW experience without creating a cumbersome security force assistance organization that takes away from DOD end-strength numbers. Using his newly funded authority, the SOCOM commander could use conventional force officers and NCOs to ensure familiarization with U.S. procedures and combined interoperability. The intelligence field, in particular, would benefit.

Balance with Conventional Deterrence

In a period of fiscal constraint, the Department of Defense strategy against future enemies must balance conventional deterrence against near-peer competitors with defense against nonstate actors. USSOCOM is uniquely manned, trained, and equipped to conduct a broad set of activities that sit between diplomacy and major war. A robust strategy of irregular war would provide a low cost, alternative deterrent against asymmetric adversaries while preserving the services for major combat operations.

In the future of irregular war, USSOCOM will be the choice to execute an economy-of-force security strategy. Small, relatively cheap, and clandestine teams would deploy to partner nations in an effort to strengthen friendly governments and convince unfriendly regimes and IW adversaries that the cost of breaking the peace will be too high to bear. Engaged by persistent development, these partner nations will provide defense in depth for the American homeland. Most important, USSOCOM's broad campaign of IW becomes an additional layer of protection for the homeland, beyond static deterrence. As we have seen, the costs of conventional deterrence and major combat operations in dollars and in human capital require an alternative.

What comes next? The answer: An energized, muscular strategy of irregular war, waged below the level of public perception, buying time and space for a military stretched by a decade of war. **MR**

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